Save the bees, save yourself

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(clockwise, from left) A honeycomb; honey bees; and a wild beehive in Munnar, Kerala.

At Sunder Nursery and in other parts of India, quality control of honey, and bee conservation are gaining urgency

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On an unusually mild May morning, Sunder Nursery in Delhi's Nizamuddin Basti area is all abuzz. Quite literally. Behind the stone wall marking the end of the territory accessible to visitors, some winged creatures are fluttering around over a few private acres of wilderness. At a glance, they look about the size of a housefly or gnat. But these busy creatures are, in fact, stingless bees, one of the several species of bees in this 16th-century Mughal garden.

"There must be 100 stingless bees around Sunder Nursery," says Rakesh Gupta, a beekeeper for over 20 years and chief adviser to the Lucknow-based Golden Hive Foundation, founded in 2015. "These are extremely versatile pollinators. Some varieties of this species only pollinate vanilla—no other variant will do."

A few weeks ago, when I had met Ratish Nanda, conservation architect and CEO of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture in India, to talk about the restoration and upkeep of this historic site, he had spoken about the bee conservation programme at the park. "We organise around 20 workshops throughout the year on bees," he had said. While many of these events are attended by students, some are open to the public.

Pointing out the 10 bee boxes and 15-20 natural hives in the park, Nanda also mentioned a service his team provides to the public in association with experts like Gupta. "If you don't like bees and beehives in your home or neighbourhood, don't smoke them out," he said. "Just give us a call and we'll come and shift them to Sunder Nursery or to another place more conducive for the bees."

Over the last few years, Gupta has helped relocate bees from all over the National Capital Region (NCR). "They choose to build hives in nooks and crannies of buildings because the height gives them a perception of safety," he says. Urban shelters also provide security from rain and the intense heat of the sun, which can melt hives. Gupta's mission is not only to find safe spaces for these tiny miracle workers but also to create empathy for them among the public.

"In India, beekeepers mostly focus on the quantity of honey produced rather than quality," he says. "The honey that is extracted is often unripe, which means it hasn't had time to develop medicinal values and properties." The longer the honey stays with the bees, the more nutrient-rich it becomes."

While the National Bee Board, along with projects run in places like Tamil Nadu's Ayyalur and Hunsur in Karnataka, is bringing about positive changes in bee conservation and bee-keeping practices, mass production of quality honey still has a long way to go.

In 2020, a report by the Centre for Science and Environment accused a number of popular Indian brands of selling adulterated honey off the shelf. Among 22 samples tested from top labels, 17 were found to have been contaminated with sugar syrup. This caused a health and safety scandal. "In the market, you get a homogenised product called 'honey'," Gupta says. "In reality, we find many types of honey, depending on the region, season and flower from which the bees have collected nectar."

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Amit Godse, founder of the Pune-based organisation Bee Basket, which focuses on bee conservation and products, sells a variety of honeys in his store. Apart from the more common multifloral type (containing nectar from a number of flowers), he has Jamun Honey, Coffee Honey, Tulsi Honey, among others, on offer, none of which contain any artificial mixes.

"The bees collect nectar from specific flowers to make the honey, which gives them a unique taste," Godse says. "You also see variations in the consistency of the product across regions—such as the more watery version in the coastal regions due to their high moisture content and the thicker viscous variety in the drier interiors of the country."

Like the Golden Hive Foundation, Bee Basket also rehomes bees in Pune and Mumbai. Since it was founded in 2015, it has shifted around 19,000 beehives in and around Pune alone.

"More people now want to save bees, and to those who are afraid of them, I say, you should do what you can to protect these creatures," Godse says. "So much of the food on our plate (more than a hundred agricultural crops, including apples, oranges, mangoes, lemons, gourds, beans, and oilseeds) comes from bees acting as pollinating agents."

DEBUNKING MYTHS

A common misconception about bees, Gupta says, is that they are aggressive and like to sting humans. "Not all bees can sting, and those that do, only do so when disturbed or threatened," he explains. "Also, not all bees are social, produce honey, or build hives." At Sunder Nursery, dry leaves and twigs are left lying on the ground to create safe spaces for solitary bees, who like to burrow underground. The protected area of the park remains off limits to the public to foster the three Bs that make for a healthy ecosystem: birds, bees and butterflies, as Gupta puts it.

If bees don't get the resources they need to thrive, the consequences can be dire. In 2025, with bee populations in India declining by 20%—and up to 80% in regions like Odisha—farmers turned to "rent-a-bee" services to ensure crop pollination. These services, which typically cost around ₹2,500 per bee box monthly, help boost yields for fruit growers (such as litchi and apple) by 20% to 35% while countering habitat loss and climate change, a report in *The Times of India* said. At Sunder Nursery, the solution to protect bees has taken intuitive and scientific forms.

Ashish Panwar, who has been with the horticulture team at the park for the last 15 years, says that strategic planting and space optimisation have led to noticeable improvements. "We have planted sunflowers, dahlias, balsam, pond lily and other flowers to attract bees," he explains. "When we see bees thronging around vines and creepers that are generally considered to be of little value, we realise that we must increase their growth." By slowly introducing wild grass, sweet *neem*, *babool* and *sheesham* trees, his team has turned the park into a haven for bees.

Despite these valiant efforts, climate change remains an unstoppable force. "The bees have had little time to adapt to rising temperatures," Gupta says. "And they are extremely sensitive to fluctuations of heat and cold." The stingless variety, for instance, hibernates when the temperature goes below 18 degrees Celsius, whereas the *Apis mellifera*, or honey bee, likes to maintain a temperature of 33-36 degrees in their hives.

As we move close to the bee boxes kept inside a grilled enclosure, Gupta points out the latter, popping in and out of its hive, which lies nestled inside a teakwood box of 32mm thickness to simulate a tree trunk. Even though the day was temperate, the midday heat was beginning to make its presence felt. "When it gets hotter than the optimum temperature, these bees will go collect water and spray inside the hives," Gupta tells me. "That's why bees tend to take over village wells in summer."

Even as we speak, Panwar points out some of the worker bees flapping their wings before the entrance to the box in their effort to provide natural air-conditioning to their colony. For such itsy-bitsy creatures, whose life span ranges from a few weeks (worker and stingless bees) to a few years (queen bees), these may seem like incredible feats of engineering. Yet, considering that humans, arguably the most superior form of life on earth, will most likely be dead without them, the intelligence of bees is nothing to scoff at.